



**Multiple Sclerosis
Society of Canada**
Manitoba Division

Response to

***Full Citizenship:
A Manitoba Provincial
Disability Strategy***

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The following is the initial response of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, Manitoba Division to the Manitoba government's white paper *Full Citizenship: A Manitoba Provincial Strategy on Disability*. On behalf of the estimated 3,000 Manitobans living with multiple sclerosis (MS), we view this strategy as a positive step forward and welcome its commitment to removing barriers and extending full citizenship to all persons with disabilities.

Income Supports

We are particularly encouraged by some of the proposed changes to the provincial income assistance program. The change in definition of disability for the new level 2 category to include disabilities that are likely to recur is extremely important and positive for persons with MS. The variable and unpredictable nature of MS, which is commonly characterized by exacerbations and remissions as well as an unknown rate of progression, has made it difficult for people living with this condition to qualify for provincial income assistance disability benefit. It is precisely this often recurrent and fluctuating nature of MS that prevents many individuals with MS not only from participating regularly in the work force but also from qualifying for disability income assistance. This proposed change is a step towards rectifying this problem.

This change in the definition of disability coupled with the removal of the link with unemployability are positive changes. The fluctuating, cyclical nature of MS can often result in individuals being able to work at some times and not others. However, because the definition of disability has been linked to employability, many have been deemed ineligible for income assistance disability benefit because they can work on occasion. Hopefully, these changes, along with the rapid reinstatement policy, will be of benefit to persons with cyclical conditions like MS. While the increase in allowable exempted earnings from 25% to 30% is a good start, it is still low and may remain a disincentive to working for some people.

We regret that the proposed changes to income assistance have not addressed the needs of those who are not able to work at all as a result of their disability. This is, unfortunately, the case for some people with MS. The low level of income support available to them frequently results in their living in poverty. In addition, because there is no likelihood of them ever being able to participate in the workforce, they are also not eligible for financial supports that would help improve their quality of life. For example, for an individual with MS who is totally paralyzed a voice-activated computer is an invaluable means of communication and link with the rest of the world. This is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Housing

In our view, a significant item missing from this strategy is any reference to the housing needs of persons with disabilities. This is a major concern for Manitobans with MS. Unfortunately, as the disease progresses some people with MS find that they can no longer remain in their own homes, even with home care support. In most instances, their only alternative is to move into a personal care home where they are generally much younger than the majority of other residents. For people as young as their 20s and 30s, as well as those in their 40s and 50s, this is both inappropriate and demoralizing.

This situation is not unique to persons with MS. There is a clear need for alternative, community-based, long-term housing options for young adults with disabilities, both in Winnipeg and in the rural and northern areas of the province. Provision of such housing

is an important component of enabling persons with disabilities to exercise their citizenship and live their lives as fully as possible.

Access to Government

People living with MS can experience a variety of difficulties with mobility, either permanently or on occasion, including problems with balance, weakness, spasticity or even paralysis, not to mention invisible symptoms like fatigue. As a result they frequently experience barriers caused by inaccessible buildings. We welcome the proposed action plan for improving access to government buildings, including the interim accommodation procedures proposed for existing buildings. We would like to see these measures extended to cover all public buildings.

In this context, the legislative building seems to be one of the worst culprits. As only one elevator remains in operation after 4 p.m., anyone with mobility difficulties who does not use a wheelchair or scooter but wants to access the building outside of working hours has to walk a great distance around the building just to get from one floor to another. This can be a significant barrier for some people. Furthermore, the elevators are not big enough to accommodate larger power scooters. This prevents users from going anywhere but the basement of the building. Constructing a ramp up to the main floor - possibly to the side of the main staircase in the front of the building - would enable people with disabilities to more easily visit or attend events on the main floor of the seat of the provincial government. They would also be able and feel welcome to enter by the front door like all other citizens of Manitoba, rather than having to go in by a side door to the basement of the building.

We are pleased to see the commitment to improving government employment of persons with disabilities. Successful implementation will require flexibility in meeting the individual accommodation needs of persons hired, as well as disability awareness training for managers, supervisors and fellow-workers.

As mentioned earlier, many people with MS eventually find that they can no longer work full-time, but remain capable of and would like to continue working part-time. One way in which this can be successfully accommodated is by allowing employees to reduce the number of hours or days they work while paying them reduced long-term disability benefit to supplement their income up to their full-time wage. Such an option is available in some workplace benefit packages. However, we are aware that this is not currently available for Manitoba government employees. Introduction of such a benefits package for government employees should also be considered as part of accommodating the needs of employees with disabilities.

Accountability, Consultation & Implementation

We welcome and support the measures proposed for consulting with the community and providing ongoing attention to the needs of Manitobans with disabilities. We recognize that a positive first step has already been taken with the appointment of the Minister Responsible for Persons with Disabilities. The annual roundtable, and the cycle proposed so that its report is available in time for the budget estimates process, as well as the disability access and inclusion lens, and the disability issues office, all suggest to us that the Manitoba government is treating the inclusion of persons with disabilities as a long-term priority. This is an extremely positive development.

In order to implement these strategies there will need to be mechanisms in place to coordinate activities across all government departments. This might be an interdepartmental committee and/or the designation of one position in each department with specific responsibility for disability issues. Sufficient resources will also be needed to make these initiatives a reality. A key component of the accountability process as outlined in the strategy is ongoing consultation with the community. Community organizations will also need resources to participate effectively in this process.

In conclusion, on behalf of Manitobans living with MS we congratulate the Manitoba government for the introduction of this disability strategy and look forward to participating actively in the consultation process, so as to ensure the inclusion of Manitobans with disabilities as full citizens of this province. We recognize that this is just a beginning and that much remains to be done, but are committed to working with the government and community to realize the principles on which the strategy is based.